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Washington Department of Wildlife



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WASHINGTON'S BLACK BEARS

Black bears are the smallest of North American bears and range from Alaska to central Mexico. They live primarily in forested areas, including swamps and mountains. Forests interspersed with streams and swamps are prime bear habitat.

Named for their most common coloration, black bears also come in several shades of brown and some may have a white patch on the chest. The sexes are similar in appearance although males will grow larger. Adult black bears range from five to six feet in length and weigh from 100 to over 400 pounds. Yearling black bears typically weigh from 60 to 120 pounds.

Black bears are omnivorous but mostly vegetarian, foraging on a wide variety of plants and animals, depending largely on opportunity. Typical foods include grasses, wood fiber, berries, nuts, tubers, insects, small mammals, eggs and carrion. Bears seldom starve but poor nutrition will effect reproductive success.

Black bears are primarily nocturnal, preferring to move about under cover of darkness or at dusk or dawn, but they can also be active in daylight. They are usually solitary, although family groups do sometimes stay together for periods of time. Black bears occupy territories whose size varies according to the availability of food, habitat and the number and character of other bears in the area. Larger male bears will occupy larger territories, driving smaller males away or killing them.

Black bears in northern climates undergo a period of semi-hibernation in winter, but in more mild climates bears may be active throughout the year. Black bears typically den in natural cavities in snags, windfalls, hollow logs, brushpiles and caves. Dunned bears are easily aroused and will come out of the den even in midwinter if disturbed.

Black bears breed during the summer, usually in late June or July. They are polygamous and males travel widely in search of receptive females. At that time, breeding females drive away cubs from previous years

prior to mating again. Wandering males and recently-evicted yearlings are the bears most commonly seen by Washington residents, particularly in urban areas.

Although bears breed during the summer, delayed implantation of the embryo causes pregnancy the following winter during the bear's dormant period. The cubs, blind, hairless, and weighing from seven to 12 ounces, are born in January or February. Litters typically contain two or three cubs.

Parental care is strictly a female responsibility as males will kill and eat cubs if they have the opportunity. Lactating females do not breed, so black bears typically breed only every other year. Cubs are weaned in late summer but remain with the female through their first year until the breeding cycle begins again. In some cases, family units may re-form following the breeding season. Black bears become sexually mature at between three and four years of age.

Black bears are common in Washington and population levels are related to the amount of habitat available. Although black bears are legally hunted in Washington, the biggest threat to bear numbers is conversion of bear habitat to human use.

The black bear's combination of strength, intelligence and omnivorous dietary habits make them infamous for nuisance problems such as scavenging in garbage cans, breaking into cabins and outbuildings in search of food and raiding camper's food supplies. The extent of damage is highly variable and unpredictable, depending on circumstances. Black bears have been known to destroy apiaries, livestock and trees. They will also destroy corn patches and raid gardens or orchards. Garbage cans or pet food supplies left in areas accessible to bears will not be overlooked.

Prevention is the best method of controlling damage from black bears. Removing garbage, pet food and other attractive food sources and securing them in places inconvenient to foraging bears will solve many problems. Problem bears can be live-trapped by specially-trained wildlife professionals

using culvert traps or snares and moved to more remote areas although such removals are expensive, time consuming and seldom effective. Using tranquilizer drugs on bears to facilitate removal is difficult and dangerous for bears and humans alike. In some situations, where other methods have failed, lethal removal of problem animals may be the only alternative. There are no known chemical repellants for black bears.

Electric fences have been shown to be very effective in deterring bears from bee yards, gardens, cabins and other areas. Although slightly less effective, mechanical fencing of heavy gauge woven wire eight feet high topped with double strands of barbed wire set out on angled brackets will deter most bears.

Loud music, exploder cannons, fireworks, gunfire, night lights, barking dogs, scarecrows and changes in the position of objects in the problem area will often provide temporary relief of black bear problems. Over time bears will become accustomed to such devices and may become very tolerant of human presence. Such tolerance makes them more dangerous to humans.

Although not normally aggressive or highly dangerous to humans, black bears are strong, fast and potentially lethal should they attack. Most bear/human confrontations result from close-range surprise encounters, often when cubs are present. Knowledge of bear habitat preferences and bear habits can help avoid most encounters.

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